

California Calling for Joey Giambra

By Mike Casey



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One steady and reassuring fact of our troubled times is that good fathers still produce good sons. There are exceptions to every rule, of course, but a father who cares will generally produce a good 'un who makes him proud.

As a member of various fight groups and boxing associations, I regularly encounter the sons of former boxers, trainers and managers who speak glowingly of their fathers' achievements in both soft and tough language. In a nice kind of way, it's a bit like going back to school. You don't dare tell them that your daddy could whip their daddy.

On Facebook, where the trite and the narcissistic compete for attention, a welcome breath of fresh air is my possibly mad pal, Jesse Reid Jr., who loves the LA Dodgers, celebrates every Yankee loss and refreshes my sleepy eyes each morning by posting a quite deliciously graphic picture of his girl of the day. A proud smoker, drinker, curser and rock 'n' roll dude, Jesse doesn't do political correctness and would very quickly tell you where to go if you ever said a bad word about his dad.

No wonder, since father Jesse Reid has been one of our most prolific trainers over the years, handling such star names as Rodolfo Gonzales, Roger Mayweather, Bruce Curry, Gaby and Orlando Canizales, Frank Tate, Calvin Grove, Darrin Van Horn and Dingaun Thobela.

It was equally gratifying to me when my editor Robert Ecksel recently shared a message received from Joey Giambra Jr. Now there is a name that will ring a loud and welcome bell for those who know their history.

Joey is the son of former contender, Joey Giambra, whose slick skills saw him defeat some of the world's best middleweights in a 77-fight career at the tail end of boxing's celebrated golden age.

Here is the gist of what Joey Jr. wrote: "My dad is being inducted into the California Boxing Hall of Fame in October with George Foreman, Carmen Basilio, Harold Lederman, etc.

"This will be my dad's seventh different hall of fame induction. He is already in the World Boxing Hall of Fame. He is called and recognized as the uncrowned middleweight champion.

"I'm so very much proud of him. He is a great ambassador of our great sport. Always clean living and never in trouble, dad raised me and my kid sister all by himself. He suffered a major stroke, pneumonia and a pulmonary embolism at the age of 78. He 'died' twice at the hospital while in the intensive care unit for over four months. His recovery has taken everything from us including our home and money due to medical bills, but this great champion beat all this.

"His life story is incredible and a TV series or a movie should be done on this great man and his life in boxing when it was controlled by the Mafia. He was told that if he fought for the Mob, he would get a title shot in the way of Jake LaMotta. But my father's honesty and integrity and his belief in doing the right thing made him decline the offer." Joey Jr. claims that his father was close to being 'hit' by the mob for refusing to throw a fight against Joey Giardello, but says that his father's honesty won him a cancellation and the grudging respect of Mafia dons Vito Genovese and Carlo Gambino.

Giambra's great rivalry with Giardello always stirs the interest of older fans and younger historians who enjoy revisiting the "fabulous fifties," when boxing and baseball teemed with Italian-American talent. In the fight game's rich and bountiful middleweight division, the 'G Men' of New York became a permanent fixture and were known and admired by the boxing fraternity for their slick and worldly skills.

Giambra from Buffalo and Giardello from Philadelphia by way of Brooklyn, became leading and perennial contenders for the middleweight championship. In 1952 they battled each other twice within a month, trading unanimous decisions as Giardello triumphed in Brooklyn and Giambra got even in Buffalo.

Six years later the two Joeys met up again for their third and final contest at the old and wonderful Cow Palace in San Francisco, with Giambra winning a split verdict. But it was Giardello who had the last laugh when he finally landed the world championship after sixteen years of hard campaigning with a points victory over Dick Tiger in 1963.

Joey Giambra, for all his talent, for all his lovely and artful boxing, never even got a shot at the middleweight championship. He lost just ten of his 77 fights against consistently stellar opposition. Five of those losses came in his last eight fights when he was fading but still artful enough to mess the best men around. Giambra was never knocked out.

As well as his 2-1 series win over Giardello, Giambra defeated Danny Womber, Bernard Docusen, Al Andrews, Rocky Castellani, Gil Turner, Chico Vejar, Ralph (Tiger) Jones, Rory Calhoun and that most fearsome hitter, Florentino Fernandez.

Joey Giambra Jr. has every good reason to puff out his chest when the conversation turns to his clever old man, who is now a defiant 82. Long may father and son keep punching.



Castellani (left) vs. Giambra

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